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**The influence of John Stuart Mill's liberal philosophy in Barack
Obama's political speeches**

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Content

Introduction	5
CHAPTER I – The liberal philosophy	10
1.1 Political philosophy and political science. Conceptualizing the terms.	10
1.2 Ideology and doctrine	14
1.3 The concept of freedom.....	16
1.4 Liberalism – a political doctrine	19
1.5 The liberal philosophy of John Stuart Mill	25
1.5.1 John Stuart Mill’s liberal principles.....	28
1.5.2 John Stuart Mill – a utilitarian philosopher.....	31
1.5.3 Mill’s philosophy – limits and critics	33
1.6 The paradigms and the changes: from the 19 th century liberalism towards the modern political thinking.....	36
CHAPTER II. The discourse – a form of social representation	44
2.1 Conceptualizing the terms	44
2.2 The elements of the speech.....	47
2.3 Important discursive theories: Constructivism and Structuralism	48
2.3.1 Constructivism	48
2.3.2 Structuralism.....	49
2.4 The perspectives of the speech	51
2.4.1 The communicational perspective.....	51
2.4.2 The psychological perspective	52
2.4.3 The etno-sociological perspective	53
2.4.4 The philosophical perspective	54
2.4.5 The linguistic perspective.....	55
2.5 The tipologies of the speech	58
2.6 The political speech.....	59

CHAPTER III – Analysis of the political speech – a philosophical and socio-communicational approach	63
3.1 The schools of thought and the approach of the speech analysis.....	64
3.1.1 The French school: Michel Foucault	64
3.1.2 The Dutch and English school – Critical discourse analysis (CDA) – Teun van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough	68
3.2 Hermeneutics – the philosophical approach of the speech. The contributions of Heidegger and Gadamer	72
3.3 The rhetoric – ethos, pathos and logos in a speech	76
3.3.1 Aristotle’s rhetoric	76
3.3.2 Types of rhetoric: argumentative, metaphysical, textual, poetic.....	78
3.3.3 The rhetorical perspective and the speech: the rhetorics of the political discourse, of the propaganda and the demagogue perspective	80
3.4 Critics.....	83
3.5 Pragmatics – the science of language	84
3.5.1 Perspective on semiotics	85
3.5.2 The theory of the speaking acts - John Austin	87
3.5.3 The study of influence – Paul Grice	89
3.5.4 The theories of Palo Alto school	90
3.5.5 Perspectives on argumentation	92
Chapter IV – Barack Obama – the image of the modern political communicator	94
4.1 Barack Obama – from social activist to president	94
4.2 Ideological influences and professional development	97
4.3 Member of the American Democratic Party and the patry’s ideology	99
4.4 The electoral campaigns and the professionalization of the political speech.....	101
4.5 Barack Obama and the American political rhetoric.....	104
CHAPTER V – The analysis of Barack Obama’s speeches	107
5.1 Research methodology.....	107

5.1.1 The epistemology – subjectism and constructivism	109
5.1.2 The methodology – the speech analysis	110
5.1.3 The perspective – the critical discourse analysis (CDA)	110
5.2 The analysis of Barack Obama’s speeches	112
5.2.1 The Democratic Convention speech - 2004	112
5.2.2 The victory speech – 2008	121
5.2.3 The inauguration speech – 2009.....	131
5.2.4 The victory speech – 2012	140
5.2.5 The inauguration speech – 2013.....	151
5.2.6 Obamacare speech.....	162
5.2.7 The illegal immigration speech - 2014	172
5.2.8 Iran nuclear deal speech - 2015	187
5.2.9 Iran nuclear deal speech – January 2016.....	198
5.2.10 State of the Union Addresses	206
State of the Union Address , 2009	207
State of the Union Address – 2010	217
State of the Union Address - 2011	226
State of the Union Address – 2012	236
State of the Union Address – 2013	248
State of the Union Address – 2014	259
State of the Union Address – 2015	270
State of the Union Address - 2016	283
CHAPTER VI – The results of the research.....	298
Conclusions and the limits of the research	309
References.....	312
Appendix 1 -The list of the graphics.....	331
Appendix 2 - The tables.....	331

Summary

Key words: liberalism, ideology, John Stuart Mill, liberal principles, hermeneutics, pragmatism, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, discursive strategy, discursive themes, Barack Obama.

As seen by Fukuyama, the liberal ideology is the last great doctrine. He considers there is no other alternative to this ideology¹, therefore, it would be quite difficult to promote another important ideology. On the other hand, there are critics that consider Fukuyama underestimates the human capacities, as there are external alternatives to liberalism². Thus, after communism, the history needed to reinvent itself and adapt to the new social order.

The term liberalism is strongly dependent to the social context. It was theorized for the first time by the lexicographer Claude Boiste, in 1823, being associated with the middle's class fight for liberty. Its double meaning referred to both political and economic aspect of life³. There are various definitions of this term. The Social Sciences International Encyclopedia from 1968 defines the term as: "*advocating and promoting a series of methods and techniques as a way of ensuring the free development of the individual.*"⁴ The British Encyclopedia defines liberalism as: "*The liberalism is the creed, the philosophy and the movement towards liberty, seen as a political method of governing, as a set of social organizing principles and a way of life for the individual and the community.*"⁵ These definitions emphasize the idea of free choice, of individuality and freedom of movement.

One of the well-known ideologists of liberalism is the English philosopher John Stuart Mill. He remains a classical ideologist, being considered a revolutionary of his times. His most popular thesis and the starting point of this research is the essay "*On liberty*". The essay is considered to be "*a Bible of the liberalism – not of the doctrine, but of the liberal political culture.*"⁶ He shows a large range of interests: "*Mill has various preoccupations regarding the equal distribution of incomes and for the role of community in the social life.*"⁷ Moreover,

¹ Torbjorn L. Knutsen, *Answered Prayers: Fukuyama, Liberalism and the End-of-History Debate*, Sage Publications, Bulletin of Peace Proposals, Vol. 22 (1): 77-85, 1991, p. 78

² *Ibidem*

³ Aurel Pițurcă, *Doctrine politice. Liberalism și conservatorism*, Ed. Universitaria, Craiova, 1997, p. 69

⁴ *Idem*, p. 71

⁵ Pițurcă, *op. cit.*, p. 71

⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Despre libertate*, Humanitas, București, 2014, p. 7

⁷ *Ibidem*

On liberty suggests the fact that freedom implies a positive living practice, based on rationality, an honest character, fairness, exactness and honest explanations.⁸

Mill is considered to be: “*the last great classical liberal and the first great modern liberal.*”⁹ The liberal principles promoted by John Stuart Mill define elements of the liberal doctrine. These principles have served as a normative structure of this research. Mill’s liberal principles are: liberty as an essential condition for developing knowledge and innovation; the fallible character of the human knowledge and the general accepted truths; liberty of expression; the rejection of “*the sacred*” ideas, as a form of encouraging the liberty of expression; accepting and promoting diversity; women rights and women emancipation; the manifestation of creativity; an active character of the human being; the liberty upon one’s body, but most important upon one’s spirit and knowledge.¹⁰ Of course, there are also critics to this theory, as Mill was considered to be a hopeless optimist. For instance, Edmund Burke calls the state’s intervention as necessary in order to ensure the proper particular evolution. This comes as a consequence of the limited personal resources that are to establish one’s trajectory of life.¹¹ In Mill’s opinion, the term liberty is a positive factor *per se*. On the other hand, any kind of limitation is considered to have a negative outcome.¹² There are no proper boundaries to explain the extent of personal liberty. As a consequence, the critics are very harsh to judge Mill’s opinion, arguing that the very bases of his thinking are jeopardized. Even though the critics consider that the existence of some limits is justified by the so-called “*taming of the savage*”¹³, Mill’s views on liberty assumes that this is a main aspect of development, as he introduces the principle of “*the maximum tolerance*”. Despite of all of these critics, Mill remains a great ideologue of his times and his theory is considered a true revolution at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

In order to emphasize the importance of the liberal ideology we took into consideration the political scene from nowadays. Discourses have always represented a way of legitimization. As a consequence, a discourse represents a social agent that has the role of representing a certain group of people, those who seem to empathize with the discursive strategy. Even so, a discourse represents more than social and communicational aspects. It

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *apud* David Russell, *Aesthetic Liberalism: John Stuart Mill as Essayist*, in “Victorian Studies”, Vol. 56, Nr. 1, 2013, p. 17

⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 15

¹¹ Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 17

¹² *Idem*, p. 20

¹³ *Idem*, p. 18

comprises ideological elements, a certain context, a certain culture, etc. The aim of this thesis is to emphasize the complexity of the discursive strategy, seen from an interdisciplinary point of view.

The legitimization represents, perhaps, the most desirable outcome of a speech. Having this perspective in mind, we chose to analyze the political speech of the former American leader, Barack Obama. The main hypothesis of the research was based on the general accepted view that presents Obama as a liberal missionary. The hypothesis of the doctoral thesis gravitates around the liberal ideology, as a discursive strategy of the American leader. The research method of the thesis is the content analysis. We aimed to develop a longitudinal research of the *obamite* speeches. The sample includes 18 speeches, associated to key-moments of Obama's political activity. The need for this kind of an analysis can be explained through a temporal evolution of the discursive strategy. The elements that we focused on during this analysis have an interdisciplinary orientation: communication, linguistics, ideological, political, and philosophical. The research paradigm is the interdisciplinary paradigm of the critical discourse analysis (CDA). Another positive aspect of this paradigm, besides the obvious one of interdisciplinary is the possibility of using a double research approach: quantitative and qualitative. Even so, the quantitative perspective is a quite-narrow one as we only based our quantitative views on words-frequency analysis.

This thesis is divided in two main parts: the first part is a theoretical approach and the second one is an empirical approach. The first part presents a quite depth analysis of the theories that explain the importance of discourse analysis and it comprises the first four chapters of the thesis. The second part presents a very detailed perspective of the research and it also comprises the analysis of the 18th discourses. Furthermore, the second part of the research generated the results, the conclusions and limits of the research.

The first chapter of the research is dedicated to aspects of the political philosophy. Here we can find broad descriptions of Mill's liberal views, as well as his liberal principles and the critics of its theory. Moreover, in order to have an organic view on Mill's thinking, we analyze aspects of his views regarding utilitarianism. Finally, we propose a summary of the liberal philosophy, as seen by many other researchers.

The second chapter of this thesis presents a wide range of visions regarding the complexity of the discursive phenomenon: the communicational aspects, the philosophical, social, linguistic and even psychological. The complex visions emphasize that fact that the discourse is a multidisciplinary instrument.

Third chapter presents the perspective on discourse analysis, as seen by different researchers. Starting with the schools of thought, the discourse analysis is up for debate from different perspectives. The most prominent schools of thought are considered to be the French, Dutch and English school. The researchers Norman Fairclough and Teun van Dijk recommend the critical discourse analysis as an instrument of research. They are interested in the social, ideological and linguistic phenomena that contribute to the construction of the discourse. Ruth Wodak makes a completely legitimate observation, as she introduces the object of history as an indispensable resource for the discourse analysis. From a philosophical point of view, Gadamer's and Heidegger's perspectives are necessary. They see the discourse analysis as a sum of personal experiences, experiences that are based on ontology. Moreover, a linguistic approach of the phenomena is needed. Therefore, we present perspectives on rhetoric, on pragmatics, on semiotics and on argumentation. Nevertheless, Kant's perspective on critics represents a subchapter of this thesis.

The fourth chapter of this thesis aims to introduce the reader into the life and thinking of the former president of the United States, Barack Obama. We dedicate the 5th chapter to the methodology of this research, but for the greatest part of the chapter we present the detailed analysis of each of the 18 speeches. The main purpose of this analysis was to determine the main communicational trends, the main ideological strategies, as well as the linguistics aspects that contribute to the seduction of the public. Finally, the last chapter of the thesis shows the main results of the research.

The acquired data show a classical typology of the speeches of the American leader. Furthermore, the results show that Barack Obama has managed to create his personal discursive style. This legacy has been replicated during last year's American political campaign. The results of the research emphasize a progressive construction of the discursive strategy. As we have indicated in last part of this thesis, most of the times, he starts his speeches from themes concerning the economy. From here, he goes on talking about investments, closely followed by the infrastructure, education, health, new technologies. The last part of his speeches is always dedicated to some current issues: climate changes, renewable resources, clean energetic resources. Thus, the obamite themes follow a logical path, tracing a predictable approach. As for the discursive strategy, the approach is constant. He starts with paying respect to the heroic past, as the discourse grows around the above-mentioned themes. In order to sum up a discourse, he promotes an active spirit, as he

encourages the citizens towards a brighter future. The obamite speeches have all the ingredients of a motivational speech, being the one-man-show kind of speeches.

We have demonstrated that few deviations from the classical discursive strategy came up during this research. The strategy remains, most of the times, a coherent one, having a wide range of themes and constructive elements. We have also shown that there is a radicalization of Obama's speeches, especially in the last years of his incumbency. This is to be seen through the language and the themes associated to it: war, terrorism, bipartisan aspects.

To sum up, the results of this research show Obama's interest for coherency, at least in his speeches. Moreover, the results emphasize the fact that he uses a well-developed pattern for his speeches. Therefore, the obamite discourses have a reiterative character. His ideological views seem to have a moderate character, in spite of the fact that he presents himself as a true liberal. Even so, we have to admit that fact that Barack Obama is one of the history's greatest political communicators, as well as a good diplomat, being the main source of interest for lots of researchers.

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